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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000291

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STATE FOR SCA/CEN (PERRY)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/07/2017

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SUBJECT: FORMER SOVIET UNION AMBASSADORS TELL MANN THAT  
U.S. NEEDS TO STAY ENGAGED IN TURKMENISTAN

Classified By: Classified by Charge d'Affaires Jennifer L. Brush for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

Summary

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¶1. (C) Ashgabat-based Former Soviet Union ambassadors told South Central Asia Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Mann during a March 5 dinner that it was clear that President Berdimuhammedov would introduce welcome reforms to Turkmenistan, though he would be slow to de-Niyazov the trappings of power. Expressing concern over Russia's activities and Gazprom's domination of the region's gas and oil trade, all also pushed -- hard -- for the United States to remain engaged in Central Asia and in Turkmenistan in particular. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Ambassadors from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Ukraine attended the dinner to hear a read-out from PDAS Mann of his energy-related meetings with government officials, but the conversation quickly evolved into a broader discussion of recent events in Turkmenistan and Russia's activities in the region.

Give Berdimuhammedov a Chance

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¶3. (C) PDAS Mann characterized his meeting with Berdimuhammedov as positive and constructive. The president had said that he was serious about making changes, especially in the education sector. But, Mann noted, the United States was also hearing the president's statements that he intended to adhere to former President Niyazov's policies. Taking the lead in responding, the Armenian ambassador -- the dean of the diplomatic corps -- pointed out that, even as the president was talking about preserving Niyazov's legacy, he was, in fact, acting to change those policies.

¶4. (C) Armenian Ambassador Grigoryan said he considered Berdimuhammedov an intelligent, educated individual who saw the problems and was committed to reform, especially in "his"

sectors -- education and health. Of course, it would take time to implement many changes. The other ambassadors agreed, bringing to PDAS Mann's attention a March 4 education decree that eliminated the (much loathed and abused) two-year work requirement before students could apply to universities and that used entry examination results, rather than solely interviews, as a basis for university admissions. But, all agreed, Berdimuhammedov's changes would extend beyond education, to include pensions and other areas.

#### Pipeline Diversification Benefits Region

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¶5. (C) The ambassadors were especially interested in hearing about Mann's discussion on oil and gas issues. All -- especially Kazakhstani Ambassador Atanov and Azerbaijani Ambassador Guzeynov -- were pleased to hear that Berdimuhammedov was willing to explore the possibility of a Trans-Caspian Pipeline. They listened attentively as Mann stressed that the U.S. interest in seeing Turkmenistan diversify its pipelines was directed toward strengthening the sovereignty of the states in the region, rather than toward finding new sources of energy to fuel the United States, as some had claimed. The ambassadors agreed that, even at \$100 per thousand cubic meters of gas, Turkmenistan was still not getting a fair price from Gazprom, and they agreed that pipeline diversification would benefit Turkmenistan. Likewise, a Trans-Caspian Pipeline would be welcomed by many others, including Ukraine but especially Georgia, which faced strong political pressure from Russia.

¶6. (C) Atanov pointed out, however, that the Russians were almost certain to do what they could to block the project.

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Russia almost certainly would seek to block the pipeline for environmental reasons. All ambassadors nodded when Mann pointed out that a pipeline was likely to be less environmentally damaging than tankers. Guzeynov said that his government was trying to arrange a meeting between presidents Berdimuhammedov and Aliyev, but did not say that the two governments had agreed on a firm time frame. (Comment: Guzeynov later told Charge at a March 6 reception that Aliyev had invited Berdimuhammedov to Baku, though this is unlikely to be his first state visit. End Comment.)

#### Putin: An Unreconstructed Nationalist

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¶7. (C) The ambassadors were caustic about the direction that Russia had taken under President Putin. They agreed that, while many in Turkmenistan looked back nostalgically on the "good old days" under the Soviet Union, the nostalgia did not extend to a wish to be under the thumb of Putin. Russia's current president was a Russian nationalist whose focus in the region was only on promoting Russia's interests.

#### Consensus: U.S. Needs to Stay Involved in Region

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¶8. (C) Ukrainian Ambassador Mayko asked whether Mann raised any non-energy issues, and nodded when Mann said he had raised freedom of movement with Foreign Affairs Deputy Chairman/Minister Rashit Meredov. The ambassadors asked whether the United States was increasing its interaction with Turkmenistan following the death of President Niyazov, and expressed support when Mann indicated that the United States was hoping to almost double its assistance there. Atanov listed a number of areas where the United States could and should seek to focus its cooperation with Turkmenistan, including human rights and minority issues. The Uzbekistani Ambassador, who remained largely silent during the dinner, indicated that his government had sought immediately after Niyazov's death to reach out to the Government of Turkmenistan, but there had been no response. (Note: On March 7, Turkmenistan newspapers highlighted above-the-fold a

March 6 telephone exchange in which Uzbekistan's President Karimov accepted an invitation from Berdimuhammedov to visit Ashgabat at an unspecified date. End Note.)

Comment

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19. (C) Post was impressed by the unequivocal support that the FSU ambassadors offered up for extensive future U.S. engagement in the Central Asia region. While we have become used by now to hearing the Europeans press for increased U.S. involvement here, the FSU ambassadors' support seems to be pinned to increasing distress over Russia's nationalist rhetoric and heavy-handed dealings with its former republics. With Central Asian eyes now pinned on events here, U.S. interaction with Turkmenistan offers a fresh opportunity to re-engage with countries in the region on a more constructive level. End Comment.  
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